





U. S. Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

James Brown's Dry Goods Store  
Northampton County, VA

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification** (Enter categories from instructions)

Late Victorian: Eastlake

**Materials** (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation brick

roof asphalt shingle

walls wood covered with vinyl siding

other \_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Description** (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria** (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations** (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Areas of Significance** (Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Commerce

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Period of Significance 1880-1950

Significant Dates ca. 1880

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation N/A

Architect/Builder N/A

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

### 9. Major Bibliographical References

#### Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

previously listed in the National Register

previously determined eligible by the National Register

designated a National Historic Landmark

recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_

recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary Location of Additional Data

State Historic Preservation Office

Other State agency

Federal agency

Local government

University

Other

Name of repository: \_\_\_\_\_

### 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone Easting Northing    Zone Easting Northing

1 18 416080 4134110    2 \_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_    4 \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

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**Boundary Justification** (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title: Ariel Skelley

Organization: \_\_\_\_\_ date 6/12/01

street & number: 16464 Courthouse Rd (PO Box 1227) telephone 757-678-7335  
city or town Eastville state VA zip code 23347-1227

**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps**

- A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs**

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

**Additional items** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

**Property Owner**

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Ariel Skelley

street & number 16464 Courthouse Rd (PO Box 1227) telephone 757-678-7335

city or town Eastville state VA zip code 23347

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**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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## 7. Summary Description

James Brown's Dry Goods Store was built ca. 1880 by William U. Nottingham to serve the community of Eastville, Virginia as a general merchandise outlet. It is a two-story, three-bay, rectangular commercial building located in the center of the town on the town's historic main thoroughfare. The thirty-two foot by one-hundred-foot frame construction features an intact original storefront in the front gable end with a second floor originally devoted to storage. The store's façade has a wide full-length porch and highly decorative molding over the transom of the display windows that dominate the ground floor. The front gable is enhanced by a stylized Palladian window framed with gothic trim. A picket fence surrounds the south side yard that is landscaped with a cottage style garden. This garden is visible from the main street. There is a gravel parking area in the rear that is accessed by a side road. At the rear of the building is a small ell with a porch that faces the garden.

### Detailed Description

James Brown's Dry Goods Store measures 32 feet by 70 feet with an attached ell measuring 28 feet by 30 feet. The building stands perpendicular to Courthouse Road with its storefront porch at the street. The north side of the building is flanked by Debedevon Lane. The frame structure has two stories on a brick foundation. Vinyl siding covers the original siding on the sides and rear, but not on the front of the building.

The facade is dominated by a ten-foot-deep porch with a standing-seam metal roof sheltering the original wooden storefront. This storefront features three bays with recessed double doors in the center bay. The display windows are configured with three large panes and a transom framed by thin wooden members and set above horizontal wooden panels. Above the transom is a highly decorative wood cornice. The porch has wood columns with scrolled brackets. Under the front gable is a stylized Palladian window. In the angle of the gable is a semi-circular scroll-sawn decorative brace. Some of these decorative elements were missing when the restoration of the building was begun in 1997. A 1931 photo of Eastville native, Lee Trower, standing in front of the store provided missing information about the façade and offered a visual template to restore the storefront to the early days of Mr. Brown's store.

The south side of the building has an entrance leading to interior stairs that access the second floor. This entrance is covered with a ten-foot by seven-foot gabled porch with columns with scrolled brackets repeating the ones in front and a standing-seam metal roof. There is another porch on the south side attached to and running the length of the rear ell. This porch has columns with decorative brackets. There are three doors on this porch that access the storage area in the ell, the stairs leading to the second floor and the rear of the store.

A picket fence surrounds the yard on the south side that contains a cottage garden featuring flowers

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that were popular 100 years ago including hollyhocks, foxglove, pansies, iris, peonies, columbine, lilac, and crepe myrtle. Many long-time residents describe Eastville as a town where every house was surrounded by a fence. An old picket fence was donated to the store's restoration by the owners of Covington (a ca. 1850 home in town).

The interior is dominated on the first floor by the store space. The thirty-two by seventy-foot store is divided into two equal halves and retains all of its original woodwork. It has pine flooring consisting of random-width boards ranging from two and one-half inches to four inches wide. The walls are clad with tongue-and-groove paneling topped with a crown molding. On the ceiling is a decorative pattern of diagonal fields of tongue-and-groove panels set in a molded frame. Five center-support columns crowned with ornate hand sawn brackets run the length of the store representing a post-and-beam building design that was common to the Eastern Shore at the turn of the twentieth century. The store retains its shelving on the north wall and one of its original service counters. The counter is set upon horizontal panels like those found under the front display windows. A large floor safe rests in the same place it has for over one hundred years in the northeast corner and is transcribed with the names Widgen and Nottingham, which indicates an early partnership with Widgen, a coach maker, and Nottingham, the original store owner. Shelving on the south wall and counters in the rear were recovered from a circa 1900 textile store from Williamsburg, Virginia, and match perfectly with the age and function of James Brown's Dry Goods. A stairway pierces the south center of the floor plan and ascends to the second floor in a "U" configuration. Turned wooden balusters supporting a flat rail with rounded edges flank the bottom stairs. This stairway was most likely installed in the 1940s when Mr. Brown made apartments on the second floor. The original store's access to the second floor was from a five-foot-wide interior stairway still accessed from the porch of the rear ell.

The second floor was originally open and was devoted to storage. It was broken up into many small rooms to make three apartments in the 1940s. The present owner removed these walls to restore the space to its original open plan. A bedroom, bath, and utility room were added. The walls are the same tongue and groove found on the first floor and the flooring is pine as on the first floor. Sheetrock covers the east and part of the south wall for the needs of the present photography business located there. A kitchen has been added to the open area. This large space is light-filled with two-over-two, double-hung wooden sash windows that are original to the building. Three rooms in the ell on the second floor were removed by the present owner to return this space to its original open plan.

There is a stairway to access the attic at the northwest corner of the second floor. The attic is unfinished with the roof framing members exposed. A new asphalt shingle roof was installed in 1998.

James Brown's Dry Goods Store was well built in its day. Indeed, compared to other general stores in Northampton County it was more finely appointed. Fortunately, the decorative details survive and with the recent extensive renovation the building will stand for many years to come representing the only intact original storefront and interior in the town of Eastville dating to the turn of the twentieth century.

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## 8. Statement of Significance

### Summary Statement of Significance

James Brown's Dry Goods Store, built ca. 1880 by William U. Nottingham, is the best remaining example of the commercial prosperity of Eastville, Virginia during its Golden Age, at the turn of the last century. The town flourished with the arrival of the railroad in 1883. This convenient and dependable transportation revolutionized the marketing of the area's natural and agricultural resources. The rich harvests of seafood from the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, and the bountiful crops from the peninsula's superior soils found a hungry audience in the booming northern cities. James Brown's Dry Goods (originally Nottingham's Dry Goods) was built in the entrepreneurial spirit reflective of the age to satisfy the needs of the town's new-found wealth. With its well appointed details and woodwork unrivalled in the county's other stores its builder embraced the great American marketing tool of eye appeal. Today, several other commercial buildings of the era still stand in town but they have been altered for government use and office space. With extensive renovations complete, James Brown's Dry Goods Store looks very much like it did in the 1880s and represents Eastville's commercial past from ca. 1880 through 1950.

The store is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under criterion A for Commerce for its place in the commercial history of the town of Eastville, Virginia during its most prosperous period and under criterion C for Architecture, as an example of a highly decorative store building of the 1880s.

### Historical Background

The first commercial endeavor on the property that was to become James Brown's Dry Goods was a coachmaking enterprise run by Piner W. Clark (of Delaware) from 1847-1864. On June 22, 1847 he paid \$1,000 for four acres.<sup>1</sup> In the 1850 census the town boasted four coach-making enterprises, of which Clark's was the largest. Clark's success was due to his proximity to the taverns on the main road together with ample space and access from the side street. Clarke employed ten: a blacksmith, three apprentices, a painter, two coach makers and three hands. In 1856 his total land tax was \$1,650.<sup>2</sup> By 1860 he remained the town's largest operator but employed only seven. On August 12, 1864 at age 57, while Union troops occupied the village, Clarke sold the property and business to Thomas Mason for \$4,000.<sup>3</sup> Clark pulled up stakes and moved.

Two years later the coach-making property, containing four acres plus another ten acres, was sold to Severn Savage for \$4,500 during a post-war economic downturn. On June 4, 1873 local farmer, Hezekiah James, purchased the four-acre coach-making property from Severn J. Savage for \$3,112.50.<sup>4</sup> The property at that time was occupied by 43-year-old Joe Widgen who was continuing the coach-making business. Widgen continued to live on or adjacent to this lot until at least 1900.<sup>5</sup> It is likely his name that survives on the Widgen and Nottingham safe still in Brown's Store.

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On August 22, 1874 the property changed hands again. At age 33, bachelor William U. Nottingham, bought the property on which the current store was built for \$2,375. The property was described as

a certain lot or parcel of land, together with all the houses, shops and buildings, situated thereon lying and being in Eastville.....containing four acres (4)...bounded...On the North, by the Street or Road, separating said lot from the lot belonging to Mrs Margarite Taylor, Known as the "Taylor House lot", East by the main street or Road running through the said Village, and on the South and West, by the lands of Dr George Kerr...and except however: that a certain Grave Yard, situated on said lot and forming a part thereof, measuring twenty five feet by twenty five feet is expressly reserved from the operation of this deed...with the exclusive privilege to Severn Savage, his Wife and heirs forever, of using the same, as a burial place and of visiting it at pleasure.<sup>6</sup>

No one now can recall this cemetery.

Nottingham was a colorful character whose history followed the South's reconstruction period. He was the son of a farmer, who at age 19 was still living with his father; according to the census of 1860. In June of 1860 William applied for a license to sell retail liquor at his store in Eastville.<sup>7</sup> According to the 1870 census this store was operated in Richard Nottingham's hotel, one of two—and at times three—hotels in town. He sold liquor for more than two decades.<sup>8</sup>

Nottingham married the well educated schoolteacher, Annie Fitchett, in June 1877.<sup>9</sup> The 1880 census cites Nottingham as a merchant having a daughter, Susan, born in May.<sup>10</sup>

The railroad connecting the Eastern Shore of Virginia with the big cities in the north was built in 1883. Perhaps in anticipation of this Nottingham obtained a bar room license in 1882. For a short time he ran a bar room by the new railroad tracks at Eastville Station. By 1886 times were booming. The Eastern Shore's windfall of seafood and produce were able to reach more profitable markets in the northern cities. A visiting reporter asserted that "Money is more plentiful in Northampton than I have seen it anywhere and the county has \$30,000 ahead which is invested and paying interest. How many counties in Virginia can say as much?"<sup>11</sup>

Eastville's new-found wealth was reflected in the construction of many impressive Victorian homes including the handsome square brick house that Mr. Bill U. (as Nottingham preferred to be called) built on the four acres he had acquired in town. He followed the building of his home with the construction of his dry goods store on the adjacent corner, completed sometime in the 1880s. Doubtless, the money gleaned from the liquor business propelled Nottingham into being a retail merchant. An interesting note is that his two brothers-in-law were also dry goods merchants: Walter W. Fitchett also in Eastville, and Wilson in nearby Cape Charles.

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Several stores blossomed in town anxious to sell the new manufactured wares that the railroad transported. Competition must have been stiff to separate the new-found wealth from the frugal farmers and watermen. Nottingham's success was probably due in part to the eye appeal of his window displays. The stylized Palladian window and intricate molding on the façade were details that were meant to capture the attention of the shopper and were very ornate by the standards of the other rural country stores. The fenestration that dominated the storefront with its recessed entrance was designed to make maximum visibility of the window displays. Coupled with the well appointed interior the store was attractive to shoppers.

On January 20<sup>th</sup> 1924 'Mr. Bill U.' died at age 83 from 'heart trouble' at home. The storehouse inventory totaled \$1,143.09. His obituary portrayed Nottingham as "one of Northampton's oldest and highly esteemed citizens. For a number of years...one of (her)...biggest and widely known merchants."<sup>12</sup>

In the fall of 1931 James A. Brown paid \$4,500 to Nottingham's widow's beneficiaries for 'all that storehouse and lot...' and obtained a Deed of Trust for \$3,500 for same.<sup>13</sup> There is no survey of record but henceforth the size of the lot was designated as one-fourth of an acre. Previously, James Brown had operated a store with Ambler Dunton at Eastville Station, a few doors west of the tracks on the south side.<sup>14</sup> A 1938 guidebook portrayed Eastville's population as 387 and described it as "a prosperous village that is the trade center for many farmers. Traffic as several interviewees have confirmed was so heavy and full of 'foreign cars' to the ferry that Eastville supported four or five gas stations".<sup>15</sup> The ferry crossed the Chesapeake Bay five miles to the south at Kiptopeke.

As his nephew, Walter B. Brown, explains, James Brown made many improvements in town including opening an early Ford dealership. A further improvement was the addition of an elevator in the rear ell of the dry goods store for the storage of surplus inventory for the furniture business he initiated.<sup>16</sup> This elevator was removed in the 1940s.

Everyone interviewed mentioned Brown's huge arched candy cabinet on the left inside the store. Crunchy chocolate-covered honeycombs sold in little brown bags and caramels in little boxes for two cents were of particular popularity<sup>17</sup>. Eastville's current Mayor, Edgar Sturgis, recalls Brown keeping his promise of a candy bar to clean up his soaped windows as a result of Halloween mischief.<sup>18</sup> Bolts of material, measuring devices, spools of thread in a very pretty case, trays of embroidery thread, and notions were typically on the right<sup>19</sup> where the original counter and shelving remain beneath a magnificent wooden ceiling. Everything else was in glass cabinets.<sup>20</sup> Brown emphasized a huge selection of shoes and boots on the left and to the back center were ladies dresses. At various times, as would be expected of a dry goods merchant, he carried "a little bit of everything...sheets and pillow cases, dishes."<sup>21</sup>

Sometime in the 1940s, Brown and his wife, Lottie, moved into the rear of the store replacing a functional beauty shop owned by Helen Northam who moved to Accomac.<sup>21</sup> Also during this period Brown converted the storage area upstairs into three apartments.<sup>23</sup>

Brown was known as a fastidious, versatile, and successful merchant. No one hesitates to say how pleasant both he and his wife, a childless couple, were.

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In 1969, almost forty-five years to the day after Mr. Bill U. Nottingham's death, James Brown died of a heart attack. His obituary portrayed him as a retired merchant and 50-year member of the Masonic Lodge.<sup>24</sup>

Mrs. Brown deeded the property to her nephew Walter B. Brown, Jr. and his wife in 1974. Two years later they sold to their daughter and son-in-law. The property languished after it left the Brown family in 1987. The current owner acquired it ten years later in 1997 and undertook the restoration.<sup>25</sup>

James Brown's Dry Goods Store is a unique reminder of the commercial activity in the community for over a century. As Eastville reawakens from a half-century of economic slumber, this building again serves as a town focal point. Presently, the store again houses both residential and commercial spaces. It is the studio and loft apartment of a photographer and it is also used as a meeting place for the shore-wide civic group, Citizens for a Better Eastern Shore.

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**Endnotes to Statement of Significance**

- 1 Northampton County Deed Book 33 pp. 167-8
2. Scherzinger, Adler Latimer
- 3 Northampton County Deed Book 36 pp. 237-8
- 4 Northampton County Deed Book 36 pp. 695-6; p. 708
- 5 U.S. Census 1880 and 1900 microfilm
- 6 Northampton County Deed Book 38 pp. 456-7
- 7 Northampton County Order Book 46 p. 254, 270
- 8 Northampton County Order Book 47 p. 40 to Book 51
- 9 Northampton County Marriage Record Book 2 p. 70
- 10 Pyle pp. 5-8
- 11 Eastern Shore Weekly Herald Aug 20, 1886
- 12 Eastern Shore Herald Jan. 1924; NCR Wills Book 42 p. 141
- 13 Northampton County Deed Book 89 pp. 401-3
- 14 Interview notes (Jan. 14, 2001) with Isaac Smith who lived behind Brown's store in town.; taped interview with Pat and Edward Holland (Jan 10, 2001) who dismantled the Eastville Station store within the last decade.
- 15 WPA Ocean Highway p. 78
- 16 Taped interview with Anne and Walter W Brown, Jr. who have contributed much of the information in this section Jan. 15, 2001
- 17 Telephone conversation Lucy Addison White to Pat Holland during taped interviews with Pat & Ed Holland Jan. 10, 2001
- 18 Interview notes Edgar Sturgis Jan 12, 2001
- 19 Carson p. 193
- 20 Telephone interview with Eleanor Bull Lambertson Jan. 22, 2001
- 21 Telephone interview Jan 2001 with Mrs Lucille Floyd Belda who occasionally worked in the store and lived in the biggest apartment upstairs in the front; telephone interview with 'Tut' Addison Robbins Jan 17, 2001
- 22 Browns and Robbins
- 23 Browns
- 24 Eastern Shore News Jan 1969
- 25 Northampton County Deed Books 178 p.344; Bk 186 p.32; Bk 226 p.28; Bk 285 p.736

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**Major Bibliographical References**

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- Pyle, Howard. Peninsular Canaan The Eastern Shore in 1879. Hickory House, Eastville, Va 1995
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Interviews transcribed with Scherer Trower age 90 in 1984 and c. 1990 with the late Miss Margaret Jarvis
- Nock, L. Floyd. Drummondtown "A One Horse Town" Accomac Court House, Virginia. McClure Press, Verona, Va. 1976
- Northampton County Records. Eastville, Va.
- Scherinzinger, Patricia Ann. Trans. Northampton County, Virginia 1850 Census. Heritage Books, Inc 1987  
The Norfolk Landmark 1900
- Turman, Nora. The Eastern Shore of Virginia 1603-1964. The Eastern Shore News, Inc. Onancock, Va 1964
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- Whitelaw, Ralph T. Virginia's Eastern Shore. Vols I & II, Peter Smith. Gloucester, Mass. 1968. Originally published by the Virginia Historical Society
- WPA. The Ocean Highway. Modern Age Books, Inc. NY 1938

**Section 10**

**Verbal Boundary Description**

The James Brown Dry Goods Store is identified as parcel # 058A1-0A-BLK-00 014 on the tax parcel map for Northampton County, Virginia.

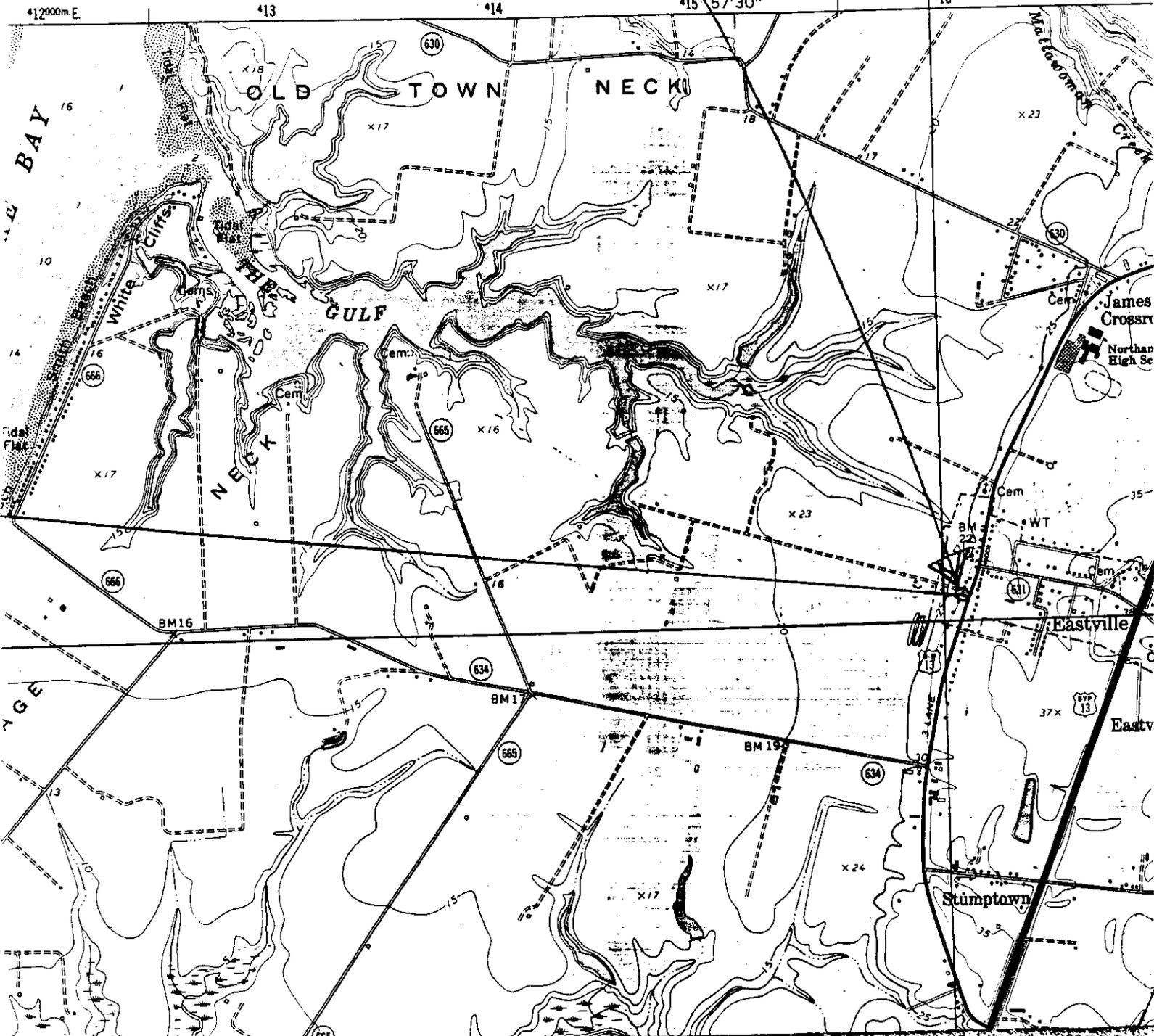
**Boundary Justification**

The site includes James Brown's Dry Goods Store and the one-quarter acre lot it sits on; as recorded in the Northampton County Circuit Court Clerk's Office Deed Book 226, page 28.

UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

JAMES BROWN  
DRY GOODS STORE

COMMONWEALTH  
DIVISION OF MINE  
JAMES L. CALVER, S  
5858 /  
(FRANK



BAY

GE

Eastville

Stumptown

Eastville